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ABSTRACT

Student-faculty contact is widely accepted as influencing retention within campus-based programs. The difficulties of implementing such contact within a distance learning environment magnify its importance as a topic for investigation. This study sought to evaluate the effect of faculty initiated contacts on student persistence within a large video-based distance learning program. The study evaluated course completion rates and student opinion for students who received informal faculty contact via phone calls and compared results to those of a control group in the same courses who did not experience faculty initiated contacts. Students (N=120) were enrolled in the following general education courses: Biology, Government, History, and Music. In addition, another group of 100 students participating in a telephone survey, indicated how helpful they considered faculty phone calls to be. The study showed that faculty-initiated efforts seem to have the greatest effect on improving course persistence among freshmen students (those with fewer than 30 earned hours). (Contains 13 references.) (GLR)

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# STUDENT PERSISTENCE IN A DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAM: THE EFFECT OF FACULTY-INITIATED CONTACT

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**STUDENT PERSISTENCE IN A DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAM:**

**THE EFFECT OF FACULTY-INITIATED CONTACT**

Towles, Ellis, and Spencer

## ABSTRACT

Student-faculty contact is widely accepted as influencing retention within campus-based programs. The difficulties of implementing such contact within a distance learning environment magnify its importance as a topic for investigation. Featuring a special program for promoting faculty-initiated contact within a large distance learning environment, this study seeks to evaluate the effect of faculty contact on persistence in adult distance education students.

Completed in Spring 1993, this study evaluates course completion rates and student opinion in courses where a system of regular, informal faculty contact was initiated as compared to a control group which received no such treatment.

The study revealed that faculty-initiated efforts seem to have the greatest effect on improving course persistence among freshmen students (those with fewer that 30 earned hours). Recommendations for further study are identified.

# STUDENT PERSISTENCE IN A DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAM: THE EFFECT OF FACULTY-INITIATED CONTACT

## Introduction

Over the past two decades, experts have recognized that students' academic and social integration is a major determinant of persistence and degree completion (Tinto, 1975). As Porter (1990) notes, this integration is more than just "goodness of fit"; it "requires a series of connections with various aspects of the collegiate environment that make the student feel like a part of the fabric that is the collegiate community." If integration is indeed a positive influence on persistence, adult students in distance education programs are at a significant disadvantage. Their absence from campus and the solitary nature of their academic experience prevent their integration into that community which encourages continuance in a traditional campus setting.

The role of faculty in student persistence in traditional campus-based programs has been demonstrated repeatedly over the past two decades (Tinto, 1975 and 1987; Astin, 1975; Beal and Lee, 1980; Pascarella, 1982; Lenning, 1982). Lenning (1982) recognized faculty-student interaction as a relational variable -- only one of a large number of variables which have been shown to impact persistence in traditional resident programs.

Many recent studies have documented the important role of faculty in distance education and telecourses (Hezel and Dirr, 1990; Burnham, 1988; Crane, 1985). Faculty contact is highly valued by students in distance learning (telecourse) formats;

students rate it as more important than interaction with other students (Hezel and Dirr, 1990). Students' sense of social and academic isolation has been associated with non-persistence in distance education (Garrison, 1987). Research indicates that first-time students are surprised at the amount of work required in telecourses (Crane, 1985) and that students in college-credit telecourses evaluate the course as being comparable to on-campus courses in content and challenge (Crane, 1985; Towles and Ellis, 1991).

The subject of this study, the video-based distance education school of an independent university, developed a program to give its off-campus students a greater sense of identity with the university community. The primary means of furthering the social and academic integration was to increase faculty-initiated interaction with students through phone calls and correspondence, with the expectation that increased faculty-student contact would contribute to improved student-institution "fit" and, ultimately, would lead to increased rates of course completion, re-enrollment and student persistence. Earlier studies had revealed an attrition rate which seemed somewhat high in comparison with that of residential programs. Nonetheless, further studies revealed a) a high level of satisfaction (81%) with academic programs and b) a high level (60%) of dropouts desiring to enroll but unable to do so due to the constraints of

job and family responsibilities. Such findings reinforced the belief that factors **outside the institution** were primary determinants of retention.

In a distance learning facility such as this one, course completion is a basic element in retention. Without the additional support of a campus and peers, the distance learner is dependent on self-motivation to see each course to completion. And because distance learning courses are largely self-paced, the institution rarely knows ahead of time that a student may be at risk of failing to complete.

Thus the Liberty University School of Lifelong Learning (LUSLLL) started an aggressive student retention campaign designed around increased faculty-initiated contact. The study conducted this spring centered around the purpose of measuring the effects of heightened faculty-initiated interaction.

## A Study Measuring the Effects of Interaction

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to evaluate the effect of a program of telephone-based, faculty-initiated student contact on the course completion rate of students taking general education courses in a television distance learning facility.

The Sample

The study centered around 120 students taking the following General Education courses during fall, 1992:

First-year Biology

Second-year Government

Second-year History

First-year Music

The sample of students receiving the treatment consisted of fifteen students per course who had received faculty-initiated contact by telephone. The control group consisted of fifteen students in each class who, for various reasons, had not received faculty phone calls.

The purpose of findings related to this sample was to describe somewhat the **magnitude** of effect which faculty contact might have had on completion rates for students in these courses. An additional perspective on course completion was attained through the evaluation of 250 course surveys filled out by students completing these courses during this same semesters. The purpose was to determine whether these courses might be **more or less conducive** to completion than other courses in the program. Yet another sample of 100 students responded to a telephone survey designed to determine **how helpful** they considered the faculty phone calls to be.

Procedures and Findings

To establish baseline data, the first step was to determine completion percentages among all students in these courses over the previous four years. These percentages were then compared with completion percentages among all students in these courses for fall, 1992 as a means of determining what difference--if any--faculty interaction may have had on course completion. As shown below in Figure 1, completion rates for students taking these courses was 75%, slightly below the 81% of the previous semester and the 77% average for these previous four years. In other words, the overall percentage of students completing these general education courses was not significantly different than it was for the previous fall or for the previous four years.

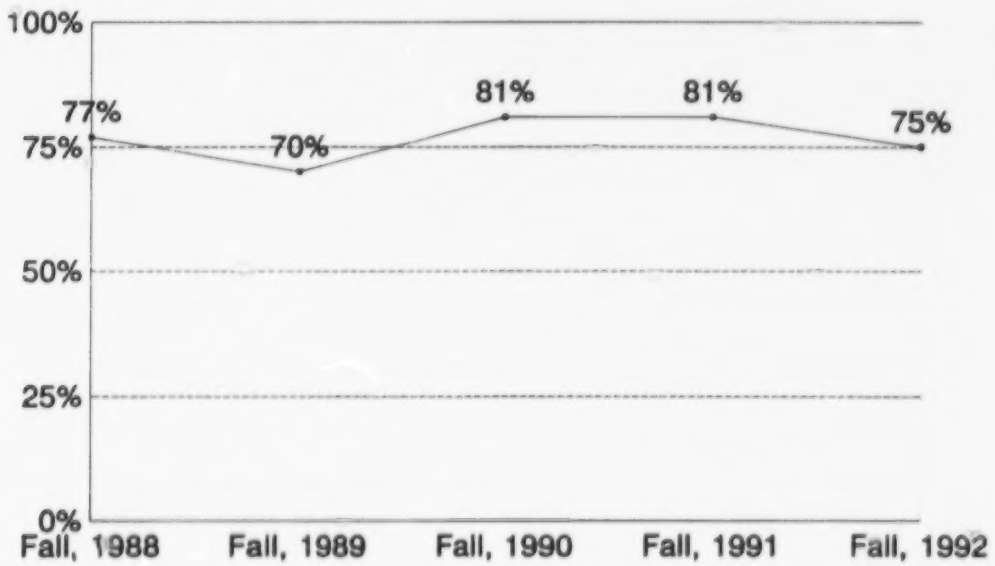
A second preparatory step involved an analysis of data from the ongoing course survey pertaining to students completing these courses during fall of 1992, the period covered by the study. Findings related to course completion were as follows:

**Eighty-seven percent** stated that they would recommend the course to other students.

**Ninety-two percent** indicated that they planned to graduate either through this distance learning program or its residential counterpart.

These findings were consistent with those from most courses whose

FIGURE 1
Completion Rates in General Education Courses
Past Five Years




Average over the Five Years: 77%

students have been surveyed over the past three years. A study of these data revealed little to suggest that these courses were any more or less conducive to completion than other courses in the program.

In further preparation for the feature study, care was taken to ensure that students receiving the treatment did not differ substantially from those in the control group. For example, students in the treatment group had a grade point average of 2.7 while those in the control group had a 2.6; those in the treatment group matched the control group average age of 39. And

of the 85 subjects transferring credit into this program, 45 (38%) were in the treatment group while 40 (33%) were in the control group--again, insignificant differences in proportion. Moreover, whereas 57% of women subjects received faculty calls, only 44% of male subjects received such calls. Though perhaps substantial, none of these differences in percentage proved statistically significant.

Within this sample of 120 students taking these general education courses, no significant difference in overall completion rates was discovered between students receiving faculty-initiated calls and those not receiving them. But, as shown in Table 1 below, 64% of non-called students failed to complete--as compared with 36% of students called by faculty who failed to complete.

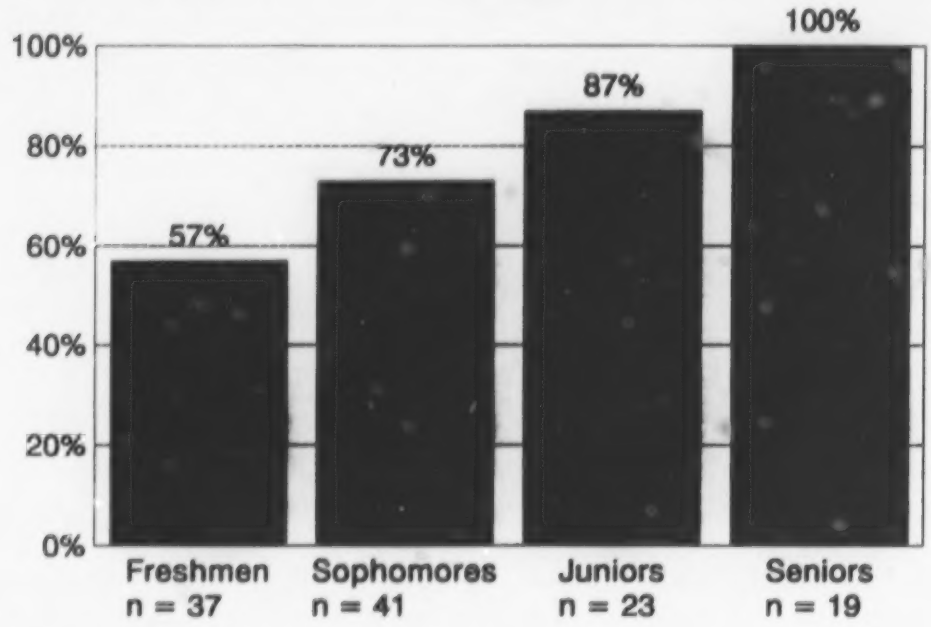
TABLE 1
COMPLETION PERCENTAGES, STUDENTS CALLED VERSUS THOSE NOT CALLED

| | Students Receiving Faculty-Initiated Contact | Students not Receiving Faculty-Initiated Contact | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Students Completing the Course | 55% | 45% | 100% |
| Students not Completing the Course | 36% | 64% | 100% |

However, the study did reveal significant differences in completion rates among students in different academic classes.

As shown in Figure 2 below, only 57% of freshmen in the study completed, while all of the seniors completed.

FIGURE 2
COURSE COMPLETION RATES BY ACADEMIC CLASSIFICATION



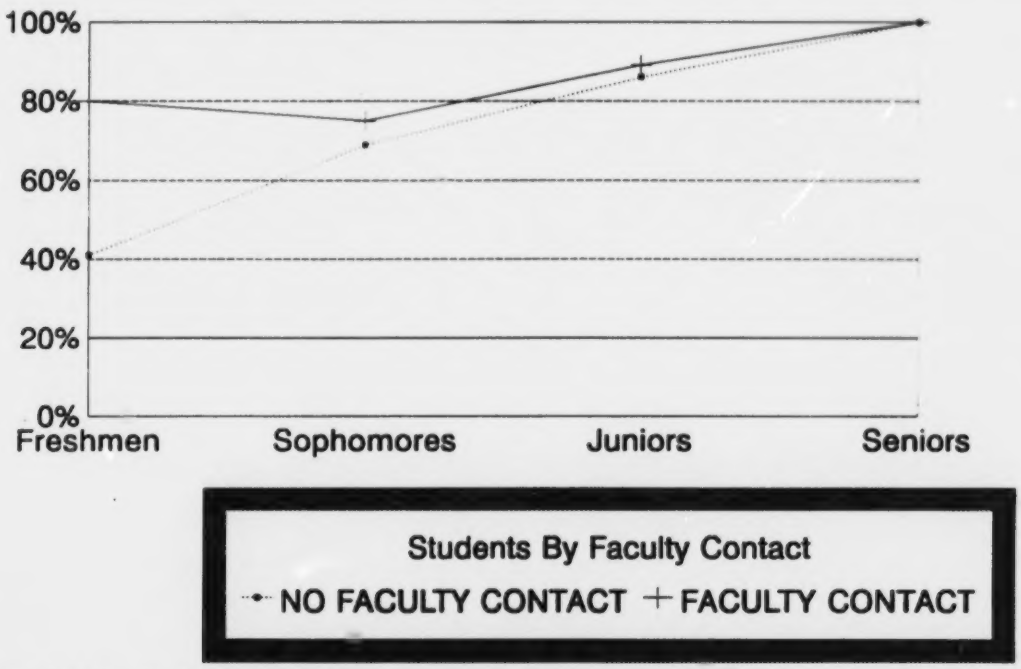

Based on sample of 120 students in 4 courses
Source: Student Records

A study of students **receiving** phone calls revealed no significant differences among classes. Nonetheless, the examination of students **not receiving calls** uncovered significant differences in completion rates. Only forty-one percent of freshmen not called completed their courses, less than half the percentage of non-called juniors (85%) and seniors (100%). As shown in Figure 3, below, differences in completion rates for

called and non-called sophomores, juniors and seniors was minimal.

FIGURE 3

## COURSE COMPLETION RATES BY CLASSIFICATION




Sample of 120 students in 4 General Education Courses

A final phase of the study involved a telephone survey of 100 students who had completed these courses for the purpose of determining how these faculty-initiated calls might have helped them. Viewed as something of a qualitative backdrop for the study of faculty interaction effects on course completion, this survey was not limited to the 120 students in the core sample. Featuring an effort to determine how helpful the phone calls

might have been, results of this survey indicate that only 57 of the 100 sampled students who received calls even remembered them. This disparity may owe itself at least partly to the possibility that students returning faculty calls may not have remembered them as faculty-initiated contact. As shown below in Figure 4, one hundred percent of Government students remembering the call considered it helpful in completing assignments, whereas only 69% of History students considered their calls helpful. Likewise, ninety-four percent of Biology students considered calls helpful in course completion, while only 60% of History students considered them helpful for this purpose. Representative comments include the following:

"Encouraging"

"Very happy he called"

"Someone cared"

"Too much hard work"

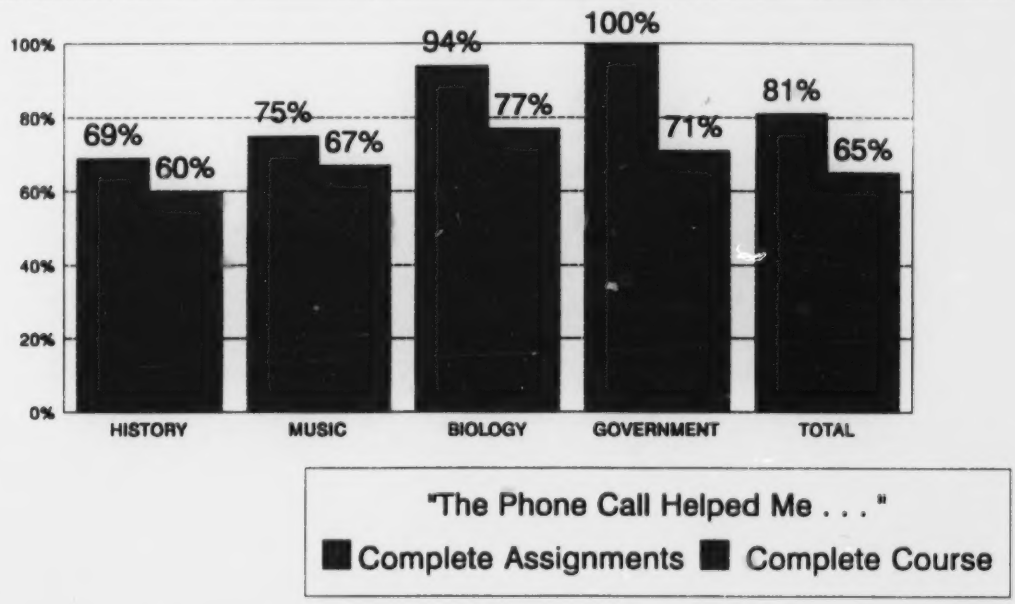
"Very kind and considerate"

On the whole, students apparently considered the calls more helpful for assignment completion than for course completion. Looking again at Figure 4, 81% of students remembering the call considered them helpful for assignment completion, while only 65% considered them helpful for course completion.

For the most part, findings of this study indicate little direct positive influence from the program of increased faculty contact with students. If anything, completion rates for Fall

1992 were lower than for previous years, while only 65% of students remembering the calls considered them helpful for course complete.

FIGURE 4
STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF VALUE OF PHONE CALL
Toward Course and Assignment Completion




Source: General Education Phone Survey, Spring 1993
*Includes only students who remember phone call

## Inferences

So what now? Have we spent a great deal of time and money to prove that increased faculty intervention has no effect on completion? Should the program of enhanced faculty-initiated interaction be scrapped? Not by any means. The value of this study flows primarily from the nature of useful assessment.

Namely,

A. Useful assessment must be longitudinal so that findings from initial studies might be either substantiated or refutiated through further study.

B. Useful findings from assessment may be serendipitous but, nonetheless, useful.

Discussion of inferences derived from this study of faculty-initiated contact will center around these two manifestations of findings related both directly and indirectly to the purpose of the study.

## Findings to Form the Basis for Longitudinal Study

Most important findings from the study include those relating directly to faculty interaction. Among the 120 subjects in the sample, differences in completion rate were found to exist perhaps, but only at the significance level of .06--slightly too high for statistical significance but also too low to ignore. Subsequent studies might well feature a component on the overall completion rates of called and uncalled students.

An even more important finding, perhaps, centers around the completion rates by academic classification. As displayed in Figure 3 above, the lack of difference in completion rates for called and uncalled sophomores, juniors and seniors may invite policy makers to lower the initiative toward increased contact

with these students. Combined with the suggestion that uncalled freshmen are significantly less likely to complete, inferences from these findings might guide policy makers toward a more scaled-down program faculty initiated contact with upper classmen but a more beefed up program of contact with freshmen.

Recognizing that many of the factors related to course completion lie beyond the realm affected by faculty contact, this distance learning institution benefitted from guidance this study offered toward the more efficient usage of similar course completion programs. For overall program improvement, the best usage of course survey may involve faculty contact of course non-completers, with the data to be used in addition to that gathered through the normal means of surveying course completers. Findings from this study, likewise, suggest increased focus on freshmen, the students most likely to benefit from contact with students. Assuming that the faculty contact program currently covers all classes, future efforts might involve lessened contact on upper classmen completers but increased contact with non-completers and freshmen currently enrolled.

## Serendipitous but Useful Information

Perhaps the weakest part of the study involved the portion devoted to data obtained through course survey. Granted eighty-seven percent of respondents said they would recommend the course while ninety-two percent affirmed their desire to graduate from

our institution. These findings were consistent with course survey findings over the past three years suggesting that excessively high levels of satisfaction prevented the type of variation needed for comparability among courses and programs.

Over the years, much effort was expended toward making changes in phrasing and form that might elicit more variation. All was to no avail until the use of a course survey in connection with course completion brought the truth to light. This was not a survey of all the students in a course; it surveyed only those **students completing** the final exam and turning in the survey soon afterwards, thus leaving **non-completers** without a voice in the assessment process and assessment officers without sufficient variation on which to make judgements about courses and programs.

This inference of the need for change in implementation of the course survey was based on a serendipitous finding far removed from the central issue of course completion. The change inferred here centers on the need to deliver the course survey to non-completers as well as to completers. The value of assessment in this instance perhaps reflects the way that assessment forces the constantly shifting high-level perspective necessary to discover such weaknesses and guide necessary changes in policy.

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